



The Inner Circle — Edition #3

Patal Lok: An Introduction to India's Underground Universe

By Dr. Dibyendu Choudhury | The Inner Circle Newsletter

The World Beneath the World

Dear Inner Circle,

Most Indians know the Puranic cosmology in name only. We know there is Swarga (heaven) and Patala (the underworld) — but we have never sat with the actual texts and understood what these realms really describe.

Patala is not hell. That is a Western import misapplied to a completely different cosmological framework. In the Vishnu Purana, Patala is described as more beautiful than Swarga — jewelled cities, luminescent plants that replace the sun, beings of extraordinary power and intelligence.

"The lower regions, O Maitreya, termed Atala, Vitala, Nitala, Gabhastimat, Mahatala, Sutala, and Patala, are each ten thousand yojanas in extent. Their soil is respectively white, black, purple, yellow, sandy, stony, and of gold. They abound in magnificent palaces." — **Vishnu Purana**

Swarga vs. Patala — A Cosmological Reckoning

The common conflation of Patala with a hellish underworld is one of the great misreadings of Puranic literature. The Vishnu Purana is unambiguous: the subterranean realms are not places of punishment — they are sovereign worlds of their own, each with distinct soil, rulers, inhabitants, and splendour.

The Western Misreading

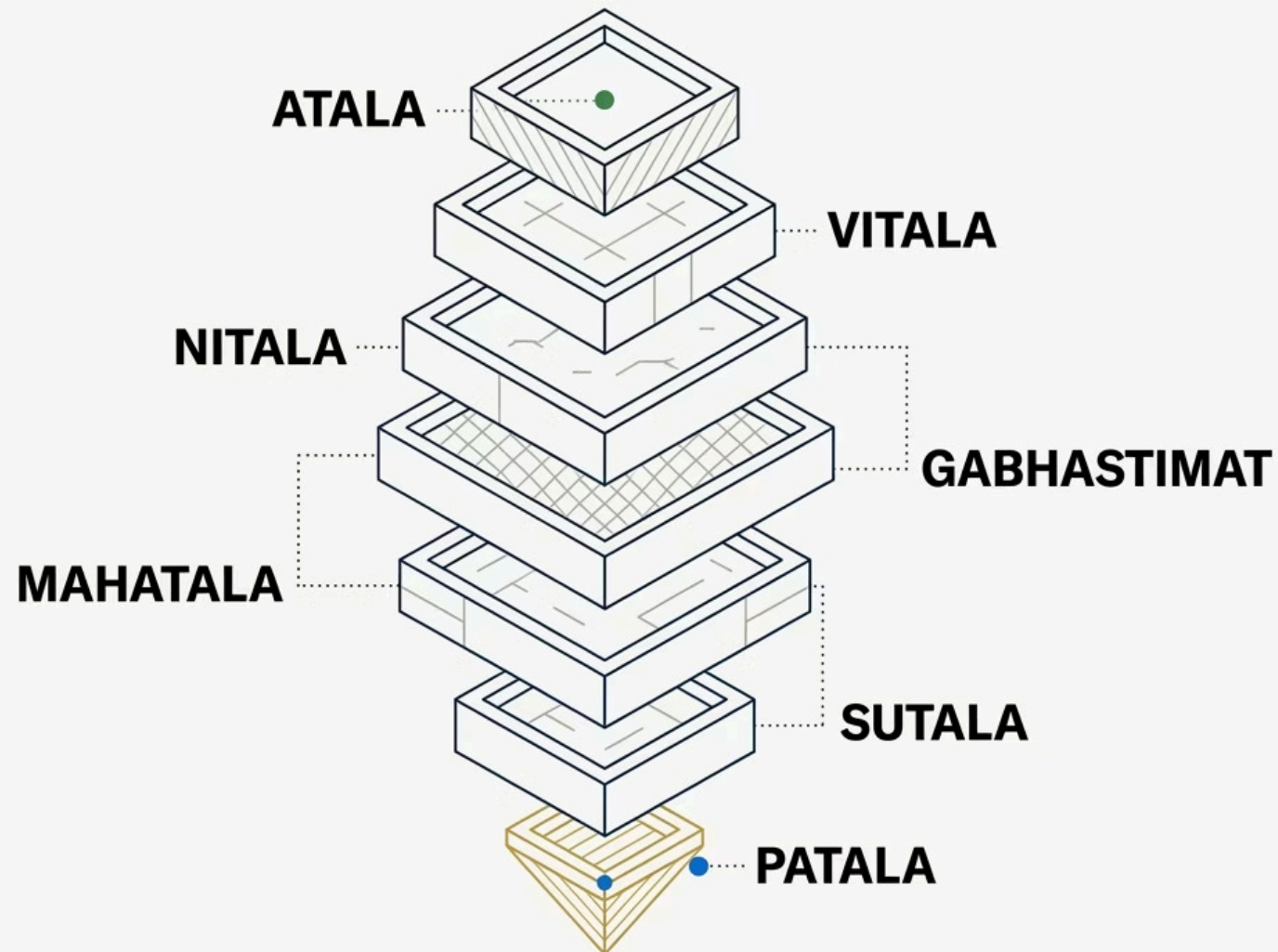
- Patala equated with "hell" through colonial and missionary frameworks
- Underworld assumed to be a place of punishment and suffering
- Cosmological depth flattened into moral binary: heaven vs. damnation
- Naga beings reduced to demonic figures rather than sovereign intelligences

The Puranic Reality

- Patala described as surpassing Swarga in beauty and magnificence
- Each realm has its own ecology, ruler, and civilisation
- Luminescent plants replace the sun — a self-sustaining underground cosmos
- Vishnu himself chose to serve as gatekeeper of Sutala — the highest honour

The Seven Realms of Patala

The Vishnu Purana enumerates seven distinct subterranean realms, each spanning ten thousand yojanas, each with its own character, soil, and sovereign. This is not mythology as metaphor — it is cosmological cartography.



Atala — The Realm of Illusion

Atala is the first and uppermost of the seven subterranean realms. It is ruled by the asura **Bala**, son of Maya — the great architect of the Danavas, master of illusion and cosmic construction.

Atala is known above all for its intoxicating plants and the powerful illusions they generate. The soil here is white, and the realm is suffused with a strange, seductive beauty that disorients those who enter unprepared. Bala is said to have created three classes of women — Svairiṇī, Kāmiṇī, and Puṃścalī — through a single yawn, beings of irresistible allure who draw wanderers into the realm's enchantments.

- Atala represents the first threshold of the underground cosmos — where the boundary between the known world and the subterranean universe begins to dissolve.

Vitala, Sutala & the Divine Presence Below

Vitala — The Golden Realm of Shiva

The second realm, Vitala, is where **Shiva and Parvati** reside in their subterranean form. Their divine presence transforms the very geology of the realm — gold deposits form from the union of their energies, giving Vitala its characteristic richness. The soil here is black, yet the realm gleams with veins of precious metal running through its walls and floors. Vitala is a reminder that the underground is not abandoned by the divine — it is actively inhabited by it.

Sutala — The Kingdom of the Righteous Asura

Sutala is perhaps the most theologically remarkable of all the realms. It is the kingdom of **Bali** — the asura king whose righteousness was so profound, so unimpeachable, that **Vishnu himself chose to serve as its gatekeeper**. This is not a minor detail. The preserver of the cosmos, the sustainer of dharma, voluntarily took the role of doorkeeper for an asura king's underground realm. Sutala's soil is stony, but its moral character is the purest of all the seven worlds.

Patala — The Deepest Realm

Patala — the seventh and deepest realm, which lends its name to the entire underground cosmos — is the home of the **Nagas**, the great serpent beings of Puranic tradition. It is ruled by **Vasuki**, the king of serpents, who is also the sacred thread worn around Shiva's neck.

The soil of Patala is gold. The Vishnu Purana describes it as a realm of incomparable beauty — more magnificent than anything in the upper worlds. The Nagas who inhabit it are not monsters. They are beings of extraordinary intelligence, power, and civilisation, adorned with jewels, possessed of vast knowledge, and living in palaces that surpass anything the surface world has produced.

Patala is the proof that in the Puranic imagination, depth is not degradation. The further you descend, the more magnificent the world becomes.

The Cosmological Map — Seven Realms at a Glance

Each of the seven realms possesses a distinct identity — its own soil, its own sovereign, its own character. Together they form a complete underground universe, as elaborately conceived as any surface geography in the Puranas.

Realm	Soil	Ruler / Inhabitants	Defining Character
Atala	White	Asura Bala, son of Maya	Intoxicating plants, powerful illusions
Vitala	Black	Shiva and Parvati	Gold deposits, divine subterranean presence
Nitala	Purple	Great serpent beings	Realm of the many-hooded Nagas
Gabhastimat	Yellow	Luminous underground beings	Self-luminous world, no need for the sun
Mahatala	Sandy	Many-hooded Nagas	Vast serpentine civilisations
Sutala	Stony	King Bali (righteous asura)	So pure, Vishnu serves as its gatekeeper
Patala	Gold	Vasuki, king of Nagas	Incomparable beauty, surpasses Swarga

Why Patal Lok Matters Now

My novel series *Patal Lok* draws on this authentic cosmological framework — not as fantasy, but as a systematic exploration of what our ancestors actually believed lay beneath the surface of the known world.

The series follows a modern protagonist who discovers that these realms are not metaphor. They are geography.

The Authentic Framework

The Puranic texts are not allegory dressed in narrative clothing. They are a complete cosmological system — with precise measurements (yojanas), named rulers, distinct ecologies, and theological significance. *Patal Lok* the series treats them as such: a geography to be explored, not a symbol to be decoded.

The Modern Protagonist

What happens when a contemporary Indian — shaped by colonial education, secular rationalism, and the flattened cosmology of the modern world — discovers that the underground universe of the Vishnu Purana is not a story? The series is built on that collision: between the world we were taught to inhabit and the world our ancestors mapped with extraordinary precision.

Until Next Fortnight

Keep Thinking

The Puranic cosmology rewards sustained attention. Every detail — the colour of the soil, the name of the ruler, the nature of the inhabitants — is a thread in a vast and coherent system.

Keep Building

The *Patal Lok* series is an act of recovery — reclaiming a cosmological inheritance that was obscured, misread, and dismissed. It is built one realm at a time.

Keep Reading

The Vishnu Purana, the Bhagavata Purana, the Mahabharata — these texts contain worlds. The Inner Circle exists to sit with them seriously, and to share what we find.

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